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Haunted Futures: the stigma of being a mother living apart from her child(ren) as a result of state-ordered court removal

Abstract

The notion of 'haunted futures' (Ferreday & Kuntsman, 2011) can provoke new understandings of the experiences of birth mothers living apart from their children as a result of state-ordered court removal. As 'abject figures' (Tyler, 2013), the mothers are silenced through the stigma and shame of being judged to be a deeply flawed mother, the justifiable fear of future children being removed, and court-ordered reporting restrictions. In this paper, I depict how these mothers exist in a state of *haunted motherhood*: they are paralysed in anticipation of an imagined future of reunification with their children. The mothers are painfully aware that any future pregnancy will also be subject to child protection procedures; thus even their *future motherhood* continues to be stigmatised by the past. However, while the ghosts of removed children signify a traumatic loss, they also simultaneously represent hope and future possibilities of transformation through re-narrativization (Gordon, 2011). The creation of spaces for the mothers to speak about their experiences can foster a 'maternal commons'. This ending of enforced silencing can be a political act, countering the stigma caused by pathologising individual mothers and making visible how structural inequalities and governmental policies impact on the lives of the most vulnerable families in the UK.

Introduction

In my last post I spent eighteen months doing fieldwork as a research associate on two national projects concerned with the child protection process in the UK. My role has involved reading the legal bundles and the social work electronic case files concerned with parents and children involved in care proceedings in the Family Court. These files contain numerous types of documents: social work case notes; legal orders and Judgments; psychiatric and psychological reports; care plans; police interviews; and minutes of various statutory meetings. My task as a researcher was to input this diverse material into a series of boxes in an Access data collection tool we had developed as a team: for example, was the child subject to a Child Protection Plan; who was the primary carer at each stage; and was there any mention of domestic violence? Mainly working alone, and spending long periods of time working in the archives of various government offices, I began to make sense of the material I was reading and classifying through the sociological lens of 'haunted futures'. The aim of this paper is to use the lens of haunted futures to consider the impact of child protection on birth

parents, usually mothers, who are subject to these practices. While this paper is directly informed by this research, for ethical reasons, I am not able to quote from any of the material from the files so – with permission – it includes the work of the Mothers Living Apart from their Children project, part of the WomenCentre based in Kirklees and Calderdale, UK and that of 'Annie', a birth mother who writes and presents on her experiences of being subject to the child protection and Family Court process.

Background

Where there is reasonable cause to believe that a child is suffering - or likely to suffer - significant harm, care proceedings are issued by the Local Authority under section 31 of the Children Act 1989. Concerns that may trigger an application to the Family Court system include neglect and physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse of a child. Other prominent issues for parents include intimate partner violence, substance misuse, mental health, learning disabilities, contact with the criminal justice system, and the mother herself being subject to state care. For example, Roberts et al. (2017) found that 27% of birth mothers and 19% of birth fathers in Wales with children placed for adoption were themselves care leavers. Thus, it is crucial to note that entering state care is not a panacea for the future well-being of a child. The majority of proceedings (over 90%) are applications for care orders, usually to place the child in state care or in adoptive placements (Harwin & Alrouh, 2017). Recently, the numbers of care cases have been increasing so rapidly that the President of the Family Court concluded that there is a 'looming crisis' (Munby, 2016). Over 43,000 birth mothers had children subject to care proceedings in the Family Court between 1st April 2007 and 31st March 2014. Broadhurst & Bedston (2017) estimate that 25.4% of women are at risk of re-appearing in care proceedings within 7 years of an index episode, with the largest proportion prompted by the birth of a new baby, and mothers aged 19 or younger being the most at risk. Broadhurst et al. (2015) found that courts will remove an infant at birth far more frequently and more quickly from parents who have previously had a child removed when compared to 'first time' parents. Moreover, the Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a 26 week time maximum limit for a case to be concluded in England and Wales. This means that parents (normally mothers) have a limited timeframe in which to prove they have met any conditions or made any changes required by the Local Authority, which might allow their child(ren) to remain or be returned to their care.

Remarkably, however, once care proceedings end, the mothers are effectively abandoned by the state. Children's Services do not remain involved as there is no longer a child of concern, and the

Court does not monitor the provision of any of the services, be these mental health or drugs related services, recommended during the proceedings. The women involved in these cases tend not to meet the stringent criteria to access mainstream Community Mental Health services. Thus, they are left to deal with the trauma and loss of a child on their own, particularly as they may be ostracised by family and friends due to the stigma and shame of state-ordered removal. In a recent Family Court case, a young birth mother had a second child removed – a five month baby girl - within a six month period and placed for adoption, having experienced extreme abuse and deprivation herself but had never been offered therapeutic support. In his Judgement of what he described as a ‘desperately sad case’ where the mother’s grief for a baby she ‘loves deeply’ is ‘very apparent’, HHJ Wildblood QC asked four critical questions:

- i) Is it right that this mother should not yet have been offered therapy, particularly bearing in mind that her first child was born three years ago and was himself the subject of lengthy proceedings?
- ii) If she had been offered therapy at an early stage, is there not at least a possibility that the outcome of these proceedings might have been different?
- iii) Even if the outcome would not have been different, would not an attempt at therapy make these proceedings more satisfactory?
- iv) Has the money that has been spent on issuing proceedings (£2,055 is the cost of issuing a care application) and on psychological evidence (over £2,000) well spent when the expenditure is incurred before attempts at therapeutic support have been made in cases of this nature. (A Local Authority v The Mother & Anor [2017] EWFC B59)

Once their child is removed from their care, the mothers also lose any child related benefits. Furthermore, women living in social housing are at risk of losing their home once their child or children are removed due to the under-occupancy penalty (also known as the ‘bedroom tax’) which was introduced as part of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. In these dire circumstances, it is perhaps understandable that the women (re)turn to drugs and alcohol, remain in violent relationships, or indeed, become pregnant again as a way to ameliorate their grief. This is encapsulated in the words of one of the women in the Mothers Living Apart from their Children project:

Instead of getting my head together and getting them back, I did the opposite and started drinking even more. I didn’t care. They’d took my kids and it made me worse. I didn’t care whether I lived or died. I thought my kids would be better off without me. My family wouldn’t talk to me. I was disowned. I’d lost my kids. I lost my house. He was in jail. I’d lost everything. (Darby et al., 2014, p.29)

Thus, the loss of a child has far reaching material as well as psychological effects; what Broadhurst & Mason (2017) have described as the 'collateral consequences' of court-ordered child removal.

Being haunted

After a few weeks in the archives, reading these highly detailed and distressing accounts of mothers and children, their stories began to haunt me. The most distressing material was finding fragments of paper, handwritten letters from mothers or grandmothers, tucked within the typed bureaucratic reports, begging the Family Court Judge to let their child return home to them. The photographs within the documents were particularly haunting, as this excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates:

What is it about the photos that is so deeply affecting? Haunted by images. I stare at them – these photos where the children and mothers are smiling. Trying to decipher what happened, why things are going so wrong, to such an extreme. There is something about the visual that makes things more real/vivid/immediate/emotive. (Fieldnotes, 10 March 2016)

I began to 'see' the children and mothers I was reading about everywhere: on buses, trains, in shops and cafes. Outside of work, I was drawn to reading work on 'hauntology' (Derrida, 1994). Avery F. Gordon's (2008) seminal book, *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination* and an article by Debra Ferreday & Adi Kuntsman (2011) on 'haunted futures' deeply resonated with my experiences of reading the documents. To be haunted is to be in 'a heightened state of awareness; the hairs on our neck stand up: being affected by haunting, our bodies become alert, sensitive' (Ferreday & Kuntsman, 2011, p.9). This affect had a visceral impact on me:

The stories stay with me, haunt me, infect me, change me, impact on me (feelings of sickness, panic). (Fieldnotes, 21 February 2016)

Ghosts identify what is unsettling, difficult and painful (Gordon, 2008). In her book, Gordon (2008, p.23-4) explores three broad questions: first, we are part of the story – the ghost must speak to *me*; second, what does the ghost say as it speaks, barely, in the interstices of the visible and the invisible?; and third, what are the alternative stories we ought to and can write about the relationship among power, knowledge, and experience? This paper will explore these questions in relation to the experiences of birth mothers living apart from their children following state ordered removal. The ghost *spoke to me*: through this identification with the stories in the archives, I came to recognise that the mothers were also haunted. Being haunted is affective and magical,

engendering a transformative recognition which brings new knowledge (Gordon, 2008). Ghosts make the political, social and economic operation of stigma visible; challenging the silencing that stigma brings; and enabling the telling of alternative stories.

Stigmatised motherhood

Mothers who have their children removed by the state are haunted by the shame of being judged to be a deeply flawed mother; 'abject figures' (Tyler, 2013) frequently stigmatised in public forums. Here parenting is collapsed into failed mothering; an intersectional shaming process involving imagined moral flaws of class, gender, and sexuality (Allen & Taylor, 2012). These working class mothers are positioned as having fecund and excessive femininities (Skeggs, 2004), and become objects of disgust and repulsion. Tyler (2013) shows how disgust is political; attributed to certain bodies as part of wider social relations of power. Child protection in England is dominated by a focus on risk and risk aversion with limited attention to any economic, environmental and cultural factors (Featherstone et al., 2016). In particular, poverty is the elephant in the room in relation to child neglect (Gupta, 2017). This is in spite of the current austerity measures in the UK which are having a severe impact on the lives of low income families, particularly lone parent families, with increasing numbers struggling to provide basic essentials such as food and warmth to their children. For example, a 2017 report (Loopstra & Lalor, 2017) on surging foodbank use in the UK revealed that lone parents and their children are over-represented among people who need to use food banks. The report highlights the deep poverty, income insecurity, food insecurity and material deprivation of those who need to use food banks to feed themselves and their children.

Bywaters et al. (2016) found a strong association between children's chances of being subject to abuse or neglect and the socio-economic circumstances of their birth families. They argue that it is essential that this association 'is framed as a public issue and a matter of avoidable social inequality, not as a further source of shame and pressure on individual disadvantaged families' (Bywaters et al., 2016, p.6). However, as Bywaters & Spark (2017) note, an inequalities perspective has only just begun to emerge in relation to child protection in the UK. It is notable that a recent report on vulnerable children in England, the Children's Commissioner (2017) framed the 36,000 mothers in the category 'Teenage mothers aged 19 and under living with their children in 2016' as 'Children and young people whose actions put their lives at risk'. In other words, they are depicted as individually responsible, through their actions, for their own precarity and vulnerability. Thus, the

structural reasons why young people may become pregnant and then struggle to be 'good enough' parents is absent in this account.

The UK government has funded a high-profile service developed specifically to work with women who have, or are at risk of, having more than one child being removed from their care. 'Pause' aims to:

...break the cycle of repeat removal by intervening at a point when the women have no children in their care and offers them a chance to take a pause from the usual periods of chaos, anger and reaction to care proceedings... to focus on themselves with the purpose of supporting them to take control of their lives and to develop new skills and responses.

<http://www.pause.org.uk/aboutpause/model>

It is a requirement that the women accept a Long Acting Reversible Contraceptive (LARC) in the form of a contraceptive implant for the 18 months they are part of the programme. They cannot access the well-funded resources without consenting to the LARC as this is deemed necessary to the "success" of the project which is predicated on working with women at a time when they do not have a child in their care or are not pregnant. Here the implication is that 'it is not deprivation and inequality which need to be "reduced", but the poor themselves' (Tyler, 2013, p.193). Other projects working with mothers who have had a child removed, such as Mothers Living Apart from their Children and After Adoption's 'Breaking the Cycle', do not require them to accept a LARC. Notably, it is Pause that is being rolled out nationally; recently securing £6.8m of funding from the Department for Education's Innovation Fund to further extend its reach. For Pause, success is measured in the numbers of *babies not born* and these calculated numbers of unborn babies are awarded a monetary value, and are used as a primary measure of the success of the programme. For example, their Chief Executive recently specified that: 'Pause has supported 137 women - without the intervention of Pause, this group of women would have been likely to have had 27 more children taken into care per year at a cost of over £1.5 million a year to the tax payer' (Hillier, 2017). Within this calculative framework, controlling the reproductive lives of working class mothers in ways which curtail future claims upon the state is construed as a policy solution to the imagined (moral) problem of their "failed parenting" and "welfare dependency". Poverty is recast as an outcome of maternal biology (Gillies et al., 2017; White & Wastell, 2016).

Haunted motherhood

State-ordered removal disrupts the expected future for both the children and their birth mothers. For the mothers, this is a unique form of loss and trauma as their child has not died but is living elsewhere, often for the entirety of their childhood. The women are mothers and their children are alive but they are not even allowed to know where their children are living. The children are a 'ghostly presence'; there and not there at the same time (Gordon, 2008, p.6). 'Annie', the birth mother introduced above, had her newborn baby forcibly taken from her under a court order whilst she was in the maternity ward. Annie was sent home in a taxi, without her four day old baby, alone, bleeding, breasts leaking milk. In her blog, *Surviving Safeguarding*, 'Annie' (2015) writes: 'It was like a death every time I had to leave my baby after contact... It was like I was grieving, whilst my child was still alive, all the time having to keep fighting'. Elsewhere, 'Annie' remembers 'looking outside at the sky and knowing my children were under it – but that was all I knew' (A Safeguarding Survivor, 2017, p.129). Furthermore, the mothers are unable to follow the customary grief rituals of bereavement as their child has not died but is alive, but somewhere unknown. Here, the past, present and future of motherhood is co-present, as a poem by one of the mothers from the Mothers Living Apart from their Children project makes clear:

We aren't classed as mothers.

We have no rights.

We don't feel we have a job as a mum anymore.

Our homes are dead...

Being a mum never goes away in our hearts and mind.

We have feelings.

We have a heart. Shock anger, emotion, crying, powerless...

Where are they now?

We have to let them know some way we're still here for them. (Darby et al., 2014, p.74)

The mothers exist in a state of *haunted motherhood*, living for an imagined future when their child reaches adulthood. Some have tattoos of their child's name inscribed on their skin, buy presents, and write letters to their child in preparation for reunification. Another of the mothers from the project explains that:

I've written my daughter a letter every week to let her know she's in my thoughts and when she's older she can have them. (Darby et al., 2014, p.77)

A third mother from the project explains her she has made her son an album:

I put his birth certificate in his album tucked behind a photograph of me and him. No-one would know it was there. I put it there for him. (Darby et al., 2014, p.88)

These mothers exist in the present for an anticipated future with their child; thus, their past, present and future become mutually intertwined (Urry, 2016). The mothers are living for an imagined future; one which may not even happen. This anticipated future absorbs the present. Thus, haunting is not just a matter of the past or even the present, haunting is also a matter of the future (Ferreday & Kuntsman, 2011).

A scheme called 'Letterbox Contact' allows two-way indirect contact between birth families and children who have been adopted and is set out in the final care plan as part of the court process. It usually takes the form of a letter once a year. Obviously this can be both a positive and a profoundly difficult letter for the mothers to compose and to receive. One of the women from the Mothers Living Apart from their Children project discusses a letter she had just received from her youngest daughter who had been adopted:

She told me she looks like the princess from Disney's *Tangle*. She can write her own name, knows her colours, can ride a bike. Now when I'm out, I find myself searching for a little girl with blond hair. Social Services wouldn't let me have the photo the foster carers took of her. (Darby et al., 2014, p.62)

Here the mother is viscerally haunted by her imagined visualisation of her daughter. In place of a photograph, and not having seen her daughter since she was adopted, she can only conceive of how she looks now based on a cartoon figure from a Disney film. Another mother from the project writes:

I dreamed of getting my girls back... But in my dreams it was always my four year old and two year old I got back. Last year after letter box contact with my girls, I finally got a photograph... They were babies and now they are beaming young mothers themselves. So, that makes me a grandma and I can only hope I will be able to play a big part in their lives as I couldn't with my girls. (Darby et al., 2014, p.88)

In her dreams, her daughters have been suspended in time as the young children she last saw before they were adopted. This apparition was only dispelled by the material evidence in the photograph. This mother is hoping for the possibility of a future where her maternity can be restored through caring for her grandchildren. These birth mothers, stigmatised as failed mothers, exist in the margins, longing for a future of successful reconciliation with their children. Thus, while

ghosts usually represent a traumatic loss, ghosts also simultaneously represent future possibilities and hope (Gordon, 2008).

Stigmatised futures

During care proceedings, several imagined futures for the child(ren) will be anticipated and contested by the professionals involved in the case. For example, in any one Family Court case, consideration might be given to the child being rehabilitated back home to their mother from foster care, moving to live with their father, being placed with a relative (often a grandmother) under a Special Guardianship Order, or being adopted. Each of these possible futures will be forensically examined in turn, with the Judge deciding on the plan for that child's future until they reach adulthood. Many of these children are babies removed at birth on the basis of protection from *future* significant harm. Indeed, decisions about these children are made *pre-birth*, about babies yet to be born. In other words, as with 'Annie's' baby, the child has not been subject to any actual abuse and neglect, the risk of the abuse or neglect is all deemed to be *in the future*. These alternative imagined futures are often set out in the Family Court Judgement made at the conclusion of the case. Thus, here futures are not merely imagined; they are *made*, with concrete material consequences for the lives of the mothers and children who are subject to the court orders. The objective of these imagined futures for the child are to *pre-empt* a particular happening from a range of possible futures (Amoore, 2013). However, the child may return to court as the envisaged future does not transpire as intended and a further future has to be anticipated and legislated for in a new set of proceedings.

Furthermore, the mothers are painfully aware that any future pregnancy will also be subject to child protection procedures; thus, even their *future motherhood* continues to be stigmatised by their past. In these circumstances, a mother may seek to conceal her next pregnancy in an attempt to take back control of her own future motherhood. Mothers who attempt to conceal a subsequent pregnancy in this way do so with the plan of successfully caring for their baby for a period of time in order to demonstrate that they are capable of being a 'good mother'. While the notion of 'concealed pregnancy' has been explored in the literature in terms of women hiding their pregnancy due to *not* wanting to become a mother, the consideration of concealment as an attempt *to keep* a baby is an under examined concept. However, for child protection social workers, any attempt by a mother to conceal a pregnancy is viewed negatively and is very likely to increase the possibility of

an application for removal at birth. Thus, such endeavours to exercise one's own agency, 'often lead to further cycles of punishment and capture' (Tyler, 2013, p.12).

Stigma, futures and power

Thus, the practitioners involved in care proceedings are engaged in *future-work*; imagining alternative futures for these children. Crucially, they have the *power* to 'make futures'. Urry (2016, p.11) contends that a 'key question for social science is who or what owns the future – this capacity to own futures being central in how power works'. Here the power to determine futures lies with the state in the form of Family Court Judges, child protection social workers, barristers, Children's Guardians, and court appointed experts such as psychologists and psychiatrists; 'those with institutional authority...who are in a position to give official imprint to versions of reality' (Goffman, 1983, p.17).

For the practitioners involved in the Family Courts, planning for a child's future is simply 'business as usual'. Indeed, thinking futures and making futures can be seen as the *raison d'être* of child protection practices; these practitioners are 'specialists of the future' (Urry, 2016). While the future is elusive and cannot be accessed, known or controlled (Lyon & Carabelli, 2016), the anticipating and/or predicting of futures is specifically what the practitioners involved in child protection are doing through their decision-making practices. Moreover, although the future is an analytical object and thus 'not simply a neutral temporal space into which objective expectations can be projected' (Brown & Michael, 2003, p.4), this is precisely the work that the court process is attempting to accomplish. The decision detailed in each Judgment clearly delineates the planned future for a child. Notably, however, for each of these futures that are taken to avoid a 'wicked future', there is a shadow of another possible future which is not taken (Tutton, 2017). However, it is crucial to note that children actually are sometimes abused and neglected in material ways by their parents; and it is the practitioners involved in the child protection system who are responsible for making decisions about these difficult and complex matters. Indeed, if a child dies, these practitioners are blamed and shamed.

Thus, there is a *politics and ethics* to futurity in relation to the making and remaking of inequality (Coleman & Tutton, 2017). Future visions are incredibly contested, saturated with conflicting social interests and have powerful consequences (Urry, 2016). This is markedly the case in relation to the mothers; having a child forcibly removed from your care can be almost too hard to bear. This is the

shadow of future making: future taking (Adam & Groves, 2007). Although the state is a constellation of embodied practices (Tyler, 2013), as the Family Court hearings are closed to protect the privacy of the children, it is not possible for members of the public to observe these practices. The President of the Family Court has called for greater transparency, issuing Guidance to increase the number of Judgments available for publication in order to improve public understanding and confidence of the court process (Munby, 2014). However, Doughty, Twaite & Magrath (2017) found that only 837 cases had been published in the two years following the guidance, forming a tiny minority of Judgments given that between 11,000 and 12,000 children are involved in care proceedings each year. Even where Judgments are published, the anonymity of the child and members of her family must be strictly preserved and failure to do so is a contempt of court. This means that the proceedings inevitably become shrouded in an air of mystery and secrecy.

Moreover, the shame and stigma associated with having a child removed means that the mothers themselves often remain silent - or are forcibly silenced through being made subject to court-ordered reporting restrictions. 'Annie' is not allowed to use her real name or those of her children when she writes or speaks as a result of reporting restrictions made by the Family Court; thus, her very identity is directly controlled by the state and her everyday life is 'saturated with state power' (Tyler, 2013, p.68). 'Annie' cannot even name her son who suddenly died very recently:

I would not, could not, have started [writing] without the support of my eldest son. Because there remains, for now, a Reporting Restriction Order in place forbidding me, I cannot tell you his name though I dearly, dearly long to. I have no choice, for now, to refer to him as "Peter". (Surviving Safeguarding, 2017)

This is a 'testimonial quieting' (Dotson, 2011, p.242); stigma as a governmental form of classification and badging with the power to silence and constrain the (m)other (Tyler this volume). In their study of child protection, Smithson & Gibson (2017) found that the use of power by social workers - through the threat of consequences - minimized dissent, silenced parents and coerced others into signing agreements they were not actually in agreement with. Furthermore, the parents felt that they were belittled and treated as 'less than human'. These practices are part of state "stigmcraft", Tyler's (2018 this volume) historical, political and economic deployments of stigma as technologies of de-humanization.

Revolting subjects? Stigma as silencing

In her book, *Revolting Subjects*, Tyler (2013) emphasises the dual meanings of social abjection and revolt:

...the processes through which minoritized populations are imagined and figured as revolting and become subject to control, stigma and censure, and the practices through which individuals and groups resist, reconfigure and revolt against their abject subjectification. (Tyler, 2013, p.4)

This section will explore the latter: how do the mothers resist, reconfigure and revolt? In their books, Tyler (2013) and Gordon (2008) both highlight mothers who revolt in the latter sense: respectively, mothers in the Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre in England; and The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, an association of Argentine mothers whose children "disappeared" during the state terrorism of the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. There are some parallels with these mothers and the birth mothers who are the focus of this paper. In an interview with Tyler (2008, p.116), one of the Yarl's Wood mothers describes how she was 'dead inside' and 'living dead'. This resonates with the experiences of the birth mothers who have had their children removed. As Joanna Latimer (in this volume) argues, this can be seen as a 'body-world relation where becoming the living dead... is an effect of how a person is stigmatized, emplaced and sequestered by the biopolitics of late modern capitalism'. The women are positioned as less than human; their 'existence is cut to the bone' (Goffman, 1991, p.268). However, being part of a naked protest at Yarl's Wood brought the mother 'back to life'; the mothers 'stripped naked in a deliberate impersonation of their dehumanization in order to refute it' (Tyler, 2008, p.117). In contrast, as it is a closed court, the birth mothers have to appear in the Family Court as individuals rather than as a collective. They are terrified that the outcome of the proceedings will be their child being removed so it is highly unlikely that they do anything that will jeopardise any possibility of reunification. The very real possibility of state-ordered child removal means that the mothers are silenced and any public protest is unlikely. Moreover, the very real threat of *future* children being removed compounds this silencing.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo appropriated traditional norms of motherhood, protesting while wearing white shawls with the names of disappeared children and wore or carried photographs on their bodies. Gordon (2008, p.128) argues that The Mothers recognised that haunting was central to their protest: achieving this through their ability 'to see in the face of the disappeared, or in a photo of a face, the ghost of the state's brutal authority and simultaneously the ghost of the utopian impulse the state has tried to suppress'. We have seen that the birth mothers are also haunted by

photographs and imagined depictions of their children. They also carry images and the names of their children on their body in the form of tattoos. The tattoos can be seen as a literal stigma, potentially making the loss visible to others. However, the tattoos are intimate and secret, hidden on parts of the body kept invisible, or concealed in the form of symbols and images which embody the absent child. Here stigma is a form of silencing; compounded by silencing as part of the legal process through enforced anonymity and the justifiable fear of future children being removed.

However, Gordon's (2008) writing on the notion of 'disappearance' is particularly germane to making sense of the experiences of the birth mothers. Like the birth mothers, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo had a visceral kinship connection with their children who were missing but overwhelmingly present. Here too, temporality is merged and the distinction between the living and the dead is contravened. As with the birth mothers, this connection is affective: 'Disappearance was all around them, they smelled it, they sensed it, they felt its bewitching compulsion: it was threatening to envelop them' (Gordon, 2008, p.113). There are further parallels; their children have disappeared through enforced absence and fearful silence. Finally, Gordon concludes that:

Although the disappeared are only supposed to intimidate this menacing state power, the ghost cannot be so completely managed. Because making contact with the disappeared means encountering the spectre of what the state has tried to repress. (Gordon, 2008, p.127)

Thus, in answer to Gordon's (2011) second question, the ghosts make visible how social, political and economic policies impact on mothers and their children. Moreover, haunting creates conditions that also invite action: there becomes a critical analytic moment where there is a demand for re-narrativization and a telling of alternative stories (Gordon, 2011). It is one of the contentions of this paper that making the haunting experiences of these birth mothers knowable and visible is a political project, in as much as it contributes to demands for better understanding of the structural causes and consequences, such as poverty and male intimate partner violence, which lead to court ordered removals in the first place.

The ordinary magic of living with ghosts

The trauma of court-ordered child removal can, understandably, mire the mothers in a swamp of pain, shame, and regret: a 'speechless bare life' (Tyler, 2013, p.116) of enforced silencing. However, haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a "something-to-be-done"; namely, a means of

reclaiming the living present and the possibilities of potential futures through individual, social or political movement and change (Gordon, 2011). Leder's (2000) work with prison inmates, mainly serving life sentences in maximum security prisons in the US is relevant here. Many of the inmates described living in the past or the future:

Quite a few guys try to live in the past. I like living in the future, thinking about what my life is going to be. But I think one thing most of us try to avoid is the *present*. Because the present is the most painful. (Leder, 2000, p.86)

The inmates described this as "time doing you". For the mothers this involves dwelling on the past whilst dreaming of a future, with the present as a living dead. In contrast, "doing time" is where the living present is reclaimed as another inmate explains: 'To me, time is like a dragon I have to slay. If I can master the present, I will have used my time to *redeem* time' (Leder, 2000, p.86). The challenge is to remain in the present and listen to what the ghosts are revealing (Ferreday and Kuntsman, 2011). For the women in the Mothers Living Apart from their Children project, this staying in the present can come from the commonality of being part of the group. As one mother explains through a poem:

in the stillness we listen
 her words splintered with tears...
 they hold each other laugh cry
 they use ordinary magic
 to keep the room safe
 strong and clever women
 who understand what it is
 to be broken. (Darby et al., 2014, p.87)

Thus, groups such as Mothers Living Apart from their Children, After Adoption's 'Breaking the Cycle', and the organisation Match Mothers (Mothers Apart from Their Children) provide spaces where mothers can meet with others who are living with similar experiences. For example, Match Mothers recognise the isolation of being a mother apart from her children and state:

You are not alone and do not have to take the journey of being a mother apart on your own... we can offer you a confidential, safe and secure environment for you to discuss your situation with other mothers in the same situation <http://www.matchmothers.org/images/rosalind3.pdf>

This collectivity of mothers living apart from their children, sharing their experiences of grief and haunting, and in doing negotiating the stigma of been deemed 'failed mothers' by the state, can be seen as a form of 'maternal commons' (Tyler, 2013). Living with ghosts collectively in this way can allow for re-narrativizations; enabling the mothers to develop the consciousness that the situations in which they found themselves were often outside of their 'control' or 'choices' in any simple way, revealing the absence of resources and the deep structural inequalities in which they live. Anonymous blogs such as the one by 'Annie' make clear the inhumane nature of removal of a newborn baby, thus rupturing the often hidden and taken for granted practices of the current child protection process and forcing a retelling of child removal. It is important to make clear that this is not to deny or minimise the lived reality of children who are experiencing neglect and abuse. Instead, the re-narrativization by the mothers challenges the dominant neoliberal discourse that child neglect is a result of parental pathology and individual blame which obscures the structural inequalities and poverty in which many vulnerable families live (Gupta, 2017). How many children might stay with their mothers in the context of a more equal distribution of resources and a strong welfare state with comprehensive services to support families? Featherstone et al. (2014) call for humane child protection practices where the child is seen as a relational being and there is recognition and support for families through community engagement and community development. Engaging with the sensory and affectivity imbued in haunting can probe, provoke and stimulate new imaginations of the future (Coleman, 2017). Thus, when we 'open ourselves to being haunted, we might find that the present and its possibilities are transformed, with radical consequences' (Ferreday & Kuntsman, 2011, p.8).

Conclusion

My engagement with ghosts began when the stories of the birth mothers and children began to haunt me. The ghosts spoke to me; unsettled and disturbed me; but enabled a transformative recognition that the mothers may also be understood as being haunted. I have argued that women who have had their children removed exist in a state of haunted motherhood, suspended in the shadowlands where the living and the invisible co-exist, and temporality is both disrupted and merged. Being haunted is overwhelming and affective; and almost impossible to put into words.

Their children are there and yet not there; they are living and yet out of reach and invisible. Furthermore, the mothers are silenced by shame and the justifiable fear of future children also being removed through the Family Court system. Thus, stigma not only impacts on the mothers' pasts and presents, their very futures are stigmatised. The lens of haunted futures has also allowed for making visible the taken for granted child protection practices of creating futures. The ability to create futures is suffused with state power. This engagement with the future is an encounter with an intangible world but one that has very real and material consequences for the past, present, and future lives of the mothers and their children.

However, ghosts appear at the interstices of the barely visible, alerting us to what has been concealed. While the ghost signifies a traumatic loss, it also simultaneously represents hope and future possibilities of transformation through a demand for re-narrativization through the telling of alternative stories (Gordon, 2008). The creation of spaces for the mothers to speak collectively - or individually in blogs - about their experiences can foster a maternal commons, challenging the isolation, shame and stigma of being a mother living apart from her children. This ending of enforced silencing can be a political act, making visible how structural inequalities and governmental policies such as austerity impact on the lives of the most vulnerable families in the UK and countering the stigma caused by individualising and pathologising mothers. Thus, re-narrativization makes clear the profound inhumanity of child removal in the context of poverty and the absence of any support for these families. To conclude with the words of Avery Gordon (2008, p.208): 'ultimately haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of a peaceful reconciliation'.

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